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U.S. Delays Comment on Report of Nuclear Equality With Soviets

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WASHINGTON—The Pentagon withheld comment Thursday on a report from an authoritative British institute that challenged Reagan Administration claims of U.S. strategic nuclear weakness compared to the Soviet Union.

The International Institute of Strategic Studies said it "does not endorse many of the current claims of supposed U.S. weakness in strategic forces." The study also said that "there is close to U.S.-Soviet parity in land- and sea-based missile warheads and a U.S. advantage when aircraft weapons are included."

Defense officials do not deny that the United States has a greater number of nuclear warheads. They note, however, that the Soviets have more land- and submarine-based missiles—2,100 vs. 1,700 for the United States—and that Soviet warheads are more powerful on the average because Soviet missiles can lift heavier payloads.

Claims of superiority and inferiority for Soviet, and U.S. forces rest largely on which specific weapons are used as the criteria. Reaching a judgment on which nation is stronger can be challenged by citing statistics to support a preferred position.

Most significant to Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger and other Pentagon officials is that the improved accuracy of Soviet land-based missiles, in combination with their more-powerful warheads, will soon make them capable of destroying more than 90% of the U.S. land-based missile force in a surprise attack.

'Window of Vulnerability'

This so-called "window of vulnerability" will extend until the second half of this decade, according to Administration thinking, when the MX missile is to be deployed. The new missile's purpose is to deny the Soviets the capability of a successful surprise attack.

The concept of a "window of vulnerability" is not universally accepted in the United States or among its allies.

Some Democrats and arms-control champions have argued, for example, that U.S. submarine-launched missiles and bombers will deter the Soviets from any surprise attack against U.S. land-based missiles, whatever the Soviet capability.

Even former CIA Director Stansfield Turner has said "there is no window of vulnerability, in my view," although the Carter Administration, in which he served, promoted the MX missile initially.

Turner recently said that he supports deployment of thousands of nuclear-tipped cruise missiles rather than the MX to deter Moscow from a surprise attack with its superior land-based ballistic missile force.

Officials here said that Weinberger, after a brief discussion at a staff meeting Thursday morning, insisted on reviewing the entire report of the British institute before responding to its contents. Articles on the report were published by American newspapers Thursday.

"We won't react to news stories based on a press release from the institute," a Pentagon spokesman said. "We've asked for the report itself, and after looking at it, we will respond."